

Decolonizing the Mind, Writing Outside the Identity Box: Vandana Singh's Complex Speculative Fiction¹

Sara Martín

Sara.Martin@uab.cat

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

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ABSTRACT: Taking as a case study Vandana Singh and her speculative fiction collection *Ambiguity Machines* (2019), I deal here with the difficulties experienced by women writers whose work is strongly influenced by factors outside the habitual definition of identity. Singh, a professional scientist with a long career, migrated from her native India to the United States to further her education in physics. Her writing, celebrated for its high literary quality, is closely connected to her scientific practice, as she herself has often stressed in interviews. Yet, academic analysis of Singh's work highlights, above all, her ethnic identity and background, thus exaggerating its influence on her writing. This means that, unlike white women authors, Singh must struggle simultaneously to decolonize her mind, a concept she has often invoked, and resist academic readings of her stories as, primarily, examples of diasporic, post-colonial, or transnational writing, while she tries to offer clues about how her writing should be assessed.

KEYWORDS: Vandana Singh, women's writing, race, ethnicity, science fiction

Introduction: The Limits of Racial and Ethnic Identity Politics

The intensive academic analysis of race and ethnicity as essential factors in the work of non-white women writers has served the purpose of unmasking the discrimination techniques employed by the white literary establishment but may also have become a hindrance for their advance. On the one hand, discrimination can never be totally over as long as white women writers are not assessed following racial and ethnic parameters as well. On the other hand, non-white women writers are too often treated as a collective, in ways that run the risk of being implicitly racist as they place skin color above personal experience in the analysis of their work.

I develop my argumentation here using as a case study Vandana Singh, a highly respected though relatively little known author of speculative fiction (both science fiction and fantasy) within the field of short fiction.² Singh, born in Delhi presumably in the early

¹ This is a working paper, based on the conference presentation "The Case of Vandana Singh: Reading Indian Science Fiction, with a Warning about Wrongs" (2017), <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/182669>

² Singh is also known for her children's books, *Younguncle Comes to Town* (2004) and *Younguncle in the Himalayas* (2005).

1960,³ can be called an educational migrant of middle-class background. Friedman warns that we need to “acknowledge the heterogeneity and divisions within diasporic groups in the West (and elsewhere)” and “focus on the mutually transformative effects that migration has on both migrants and their new homelands” (2009, 22). This is commendable but, arguably, still insufficient since Friedman still speaks of “diasporic groups,” as if all migrants could be classified according to collective rather than personal patterns. In a similar vein, Gunew argues that “diaspora criticism needs to be anchored in temporal and spatial specificities” (2009, 29), yet this fails nonetheless to account for the differences between economic, educational, and other types of migrant. In addition, Gunew's analysis of transnational authors Anita Rau Badami, Shani Mootoo, and Yasmine Gooneratne focuses on women with careers in the fields of literature and the arts who have integrated the experience of migration into their work. Singh, in contrast, who moved to the United States in the late 1980s to complete a PhD in Theoretical Physics at Louisiana State University, is a professional scientist (an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Physics and Earth Science at Framingham State University, in Massachusetts), currently doing research on climate change. Her speculative fiction has, logically, a particularly solid scientific foundation. This means that it can hardly be judged by the same parameters used to assess the mimetic writing of the women migrants interested in narrating the experience of being, in Gunew's label, ‘resident aliens’.

Singh's scientific vocation is, then, far more relevant than any other identity markers in her personal development as a woman author, a point highlighted in most reviews of her work. Professional interests, however, are not habitually included in the academic discussion of identity, not even in that informed by the more recent versions of intersectionality. Singh has frequently resisted in interviews what she considers to be limiting notions of identity and her labelling as a postcolonial (or transnational) writer, claiming instead that her work is a process of decolonizing the mind and of thinking outside the identity box based on her scientific background. These are concepts incorporated into my argumentation, together with the call to either stop judging non-

³ Singh's actual date of birth is not available online, a practice that many writers follow today. She obtained her doctoral degree in 1992, which makes it safe to suppose she was born round 1960-1963. See https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses/5467/.

white women writers by their skin color and ethnic background or, perhaps preferably, also apply the same method to white women authors.

Vandana Singh in Context: Bridging Traditions in Science Fiction

The first aspect I wish to question is the construction of a homogeneous, “so-called West” (Friedman 2009, 22), seemingly taken for granted in many analyses of transcultural contact through migration. As a scholar approaching the work of a woman author whose reception is conditioned by her identity as a migrating non-white person to the United States, I need to clarify my own position. I’m a white, middle-aged, middle-class university lecturer specializing in English-language Literature but as a Spaniard⁴ my identity is often in open conflict with the Anglo-American dominance of the entity known as ‘the West’. In fact, although this may sound farfetched I will claim that, as regards the United States in particular, Spain and the India where Singh was born are not in very different positions as exoticized nations.

Spain ceased to be an Islamic colony back in 1492, with the end of *Reconquista*, to become a trans-Atlantic Empire, unfortunately for the native Central and South American populations decimated by the brutal regime of the *conquistadores*. Once disempowered by the Napoleonic occupation and by the interested imperial efforts of the United Kingdom and (later) the United States, the Spanish territory became a favorite exotic land with travelers in search of the romantic. American author Washington Irving, author of *The Tales of the Alhambra* (1832), was a main popularizer of this trend. The Spanish tourist industry, one of the largest in the world, still thrives today on that sense of exotic otherness, which no doubt saps the Spaniards’ confidence in their ability to be active makers of their future rather than passive receivers of visitors from more advanced nations. The habitual confusion in the United States of the Latino and Hispanic cultures from Central and South America with the Spanish culture of Europe also adds to the generalized local perception that Spain is not truly part of the West and that Spanish

⁴ I’m a native bilingual speaker of Spanish and Catalan, and I consider myself a person with a mixed cultural background and nationality, even though Catalonia is legally part of Spain and there is no legally acknowledged Catalan nationality.

whiteness (whatever this means) is different from that of Northern Europeans and of the Americans of Anglo-Saxon descent.⁵

Even inside the supposedly homogeneous West there is a constant need to make one's own local non-Anglophone identity known to Anglophone consumers of culture. The racial and ethnic discrimination of non-white authors is by no means over, but it must be noted that it overlaps to a great extent with the limited knowledge of other white cultures outside the main Anglophone nations (the United States and the United Kingdom, but also Canada and Australia). In this sense, the field of academic science fiction is among the most actively attempting to break away from the Anglocentric mold, with a sense of inclusiveness that is in part focused on the postcolonial framework, but which goes beyond that into the territory of a sincere cultural cosmopolitanism—with some hitches. Batty and Markley wrote in their introduction to the special issue of the journal *Ariel*, “Speculative Fiction and the Politics of Postcolonialism” (2002) that

Science fiction and fantasy in a postcolonial era redefine who ‘we’ are, calling into question the unwritten values and assumptions that identify ‘us’ as white, privileged, technologically sophisticated, or, in the case of the ethnically diverse crews of *Star Trek* and its spin-offs, avatars of a ‘dominant’ techno-scientific culture. What has changed in the last decades of the twentieth century is that speculative fiction has become an important vehicle for writers from outside the metropolitan centres of Europe and North America. (2002, 7)

This dates the beginning of other science-fictional traditions in the 1980s when, in fact, it would be more correct to say that these other writers begin to be known in the ‘West’ in that decade. As Dale Knickerbocker writes in the introduction to his recent volume *Lingua Cosmica: Science Fiction from around the World* (2018), “Not only does the translation river run only in one direction, it tends to drown local authors, who find it difficult to publish their work (much less have it translated into English), as local thirst has already been quenched by imports” (vii), a problem that also affects white European non-Anglophone writers.

Taking into account the often insurmountable language barriers, the leading journal *Science Fiction Studies* has made important inroads into a new way of understanding the genre as a transnational expression of the debates on technoscience

⁵ As an example, see the scandal created in January 2020 by the description of Oscar-nominee white Spanish actor Antonio Banderas as a man of color by US publications such as *Vanity Fair* (Laborde, 2020: online).

with a series of special issues dealing with specific geographical areas.⁶ I was myself co-editor, together with Fernando Ángel Moreno, of the issue dealing with the science fiction produced in Spain (2017). This was preceded by the issue on Indian SF edited by Joan Gordon in 2016, which contains one article on Vandana Singh and an extensive interview. It can then be argued that the awareness of the existence of specific traditions for Spanish and for Indian science fiction was raised practically at the same time in Anglophone academia. This coincidence does not mean, nevertheless, that the women writers celebrated in the Spanish monographic issue (Elia Barceló, Rosa Montero, and the many contributors to the *Alucinadas* anthologies)⁷ occupy the same position as Vandana Singh regarding Anglophone science-fiction readers. They depend on translation, whereas Singh has the double advantage of writing in English (her other native language is Hindi) and of living in the United States. As Csicsery-Ronay observes, “English has become a sort of Grand Central Bottleneck for achieving worldly success—which is increasingly defined as reaching a global audience” (2012, 483). It is perhaps more correct to claim that the ‘bottleneck’ is caused by the limited translation into English in comparison to the habitual translation of fiction written originally in English practically to all the languages in the world.

Singh is very much aware of her own position as an author bridging not only two very different literary traditions in relation to speculative fiction, Indian and British/American, but also within the complex linguistic situation in India. Speaking of Indian science fiction means referring to a vast field, with authors working in some of the main twenty-two official languages in India, among them Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, Telegu, Oriya, Assamese, Kannada or Marathi (Mysore online). English, an official language but also an uncomfortable colonial legacy, is the language used by just one group of the Indian science-fiction authors⁸ yet also the useful instrument that allows them to be much better known globally than the rest. The problem is that English is also a tool for the

⁶ The monographic issues so far published cover: Japanese SF #88 (November 2002), British SF #91 (November 2003), Soviet SF #94 (November 2004), Afrofuturism #102 (July 2007), Latin American SF #103 (November 2007), SF and Globalization #118 (November 2012), Chinese SF #119 (March 2013), Italian SF #126 (July 2015), Indian SF #130 (November 2016) and Spanish SF #132 (July 2017).

⁷ The *Alucinadas* anthology series, started in 2014 by Cristina Macía and Cristina Jurado, is now in its fifth instalment, see <https://www.palabaristas.com/alucinadas-2/>.

⁸ Some names are Aravind Adiga, Rimi Chatterjee, Shovon Chowdhury, Boman Desai, Das Indrapramit, Mainak Dhar, Amitav Ghosh, Ruchir Joshi, Anil Menon, Manjula Padmanabhan, Satyajit Ray, Parvin Saket, Priya Sarukkai and Kishore Swapna. See Mysore (2015, online).

cultural appropriation of India by Anglo-American white authors. Among them it is inevitable to refer to the Mancunian author established in Belfast Ian McDonald. His accomplished novel *River of Gods* (2004) and the related short story collection *Cyberabad Days* (2009) have expanded our “awareness of a possible alternative future” in which “the emerging global powers of the twenty-first century” (Bannerjee 2016, 510), with India in the lead, will play a major role. In contrast to other blatantly exoticizing representations of India in Western science fiction, “McDonald’s approach to the complex sociocultural fabric of India is much more nuanced” even though it displays nonetheless “distinct traces of Orientalist stereotypes” (Bannerjee 2016, 496).

The same traces are the main obstacle which authors like Singh face when submitting their work to the judgement of ‘Western’ reviewers. Vandana Singh’s impact in sf circles has been limited so far, despite her use of English and her many publications available online, by the lack of a short story collection accessible to American readers. The publication of her previous collection *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet* (2008), by Penguin Books/Zubaan in India, was not sufficient to call attention to her work since it lacked American distribution. Despite the warm welcome given to the publication of *Ambiguity Machines* (2019) by independent publisher Small Beer Press, something is amiss in this generally positive reception. Reviewer Michael Berry, writing for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, sees Singh’s work in terms of her geographical representativeness:

Even as science fiction published in the U.S. becomes more diverse and international, the people and cultures of the Indian subcontinent aren’t yet well represented in the American market. One writer doing her share to bring South Asian influences to science fiction and fantasy is Vandana Singh, a professor of physics residing near Boston. (2018, online)

Berry takes it for granted that Singh sees herself as representative of the entity called ‘South Asia’. The criterion of geographical representativeness is not, however, used to qualify American-born writers—Stephen King is often said to be a regional writer as much as William Faulkner was, but no critic would claim that King’s main mission is making his native state of Maine visible in American literature. Mike D.’s review of *Ambiguity Machines* presents similar problems: he praises Singh enthusiastically because “The beating heart of science fiction, any fiction really, is the humanity of the characters and this is where Vandana Singh outshines most other authors” but spoils his inclusive assessment by noting that “Additionally, a flavor of the Indian subcontinent is infused

throughout and makes the work feel fresh and interesting without making it unapproachable to Western readers” (2018, online), implicitly blaming the author for any problems of transcultural communication. The review by African-American speculative fiction author Nisi Shawl hints that Singh is part of an American collective but also an outsider bringing in exotic gifts. Her collection, Shawl writes, “showcases a bit of what we’re fighting for. It’s a *xenophile’s treasury* of nonstandard plots, unfamiliar and finely crafted characters, and new ways to embrace the wonders of the universe, with particular attention paid to their scientific bases” (2018, online, my italics). Indian reviewer Indra Das has a different view of who ‘we’ are which, oddly enough, coincides partially with Berry’s geographical representativeness: hopefully, *Ambiguity Machines* “will garner Singh a long overdue nomination from science-fiction and fantasy’s most prestigious awards, the Hugos and the Nebulas, if only because she deserves more readers both in India and abroad. If not, we can still be glad that South Asia has its very own Vandana Singh—not an Indian version of a venerated Western writer, but an icon in her own right” (2018, online).⁹

In her introduction to the special issue on Indian science fiction which she edited for *Science Fiction Studies* white American scholar Joan Gordon explains that India’s tradition in this genre begins with the *Ramayana* (circa 6th BC). This tradition has, Gordon adds, “different definitions and aesthetic principles, a different relationship to fantasy, and a canon that includes Jagadish Chandra Bose and Satyajit Ray *rather than* Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke” (2016, 433, my italics). My experience of the local Spanish (and Catalan) traditions suggests, though, that all local canons outside the USA and the UK incorporate these canonical foreign writers and overwhelmed by the influence of the Anglo-American tradition. Singh herself asserts that its influence is unavoidable but if Indian authors “want to influence it in turn, rather than be second-rate imitators, we must forge our own views, our own imperatives, our own universes” in dialogue, as well, with “the great works of the non-English Indian traditions” (in Basu, 2006, online). Indian authors face, nonetheless, an unsolvable quandary: their use of local culture as a form of resistance against the high impact of the Anglophone science-fictional canon is often perceived by Orientalist Anglophone readers as confirmation of their exotic appeal. Thus,

⁹ Singh’s collection was a Philip K. Dick Award finalist. She still has no nominations for the Hugos and the Nebulas, despite the presence of other Indian science-fiction writers in the lists of nominees and winners.

the more self-confident Indian writers are in dealing with themes of local interest—which is, after all, what their Anglophone peers do—the more they are perceived to be responding to Orientalist expectations of what they should write about. It's a no-win situation.

The Weaknesses of Identity Politics: Boxing in Non-White Authors

Against the grain, I will argue that this problem is increased by the many projects aimed at giving more visibility to non-white authors which, again, while aiming at dispelling prejudice also place them in a separate category. Singh has participated in collective volumes such as *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2004) edited by Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan—the first volume of its kind—and has edited with Anil Menon the anthology *Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction inspired by the Ramayana* (2012). However, she has most likely earned a higher visibility by participating in volumes that are not focused on race and ethnicity such as the feminist collection *The Other Half of the Sky* (2013) edited by Athena Andreadis and Kay T. Holt, or that ignore identity altogether such as the anthology *Hieroglyph: Stories and Visions for a Better Future* (2014) edited by Ed Finn and Kathryn Cramer. The selection of Singh's outstanding story "Ruminations in an Alien Tongue," to which I will return later, for the 2013 volume edited by Gardner Dozois, *The Year's Best Science Fiction* is also a highly relevant turning point in her reception as a high-quality author in equal circumstances to any white Anglophone sf writer.

I will argue as well that Singh's fiction is restricted rather than aided by its labelling as postcolonial fiction in academic analysis, although some of the alternatives may also be problematic. Suparno Bannerjee, already quoted in relation to Ian McDonald, claims that one of the major topics of recent Indian science fiction is "the specter of an alienated postcolonial subject caught in the flux of historical eddies" (2012, 283); this is, he claims, the estranged character that Singh explores, calling attention "to the different types and levels of alienation that haunt the people who negotiate their surroundings and identities in this new world order" (283). Bannerjee grants that Singh's style allows her "to speculate about different scientific and philosophical notions" but insists that "alienation in the postcolonial subject becomes her most important concern" (286). Bannerjee's Indian name lends him authority as a cultural insider yet even the stories by Singh that seemingly correspond to Bannerjee's reading, such as "Delhi," can be read from another

perspective. For Chris Pak, this story about a man who finds himself at different chronological periods in his native city, “investigates the desirability and possibility of a postnational future that looks beyond an identity defined solely in opposition to the socio-economic impact of colonialism and moves towards postnationality by recognizing the multivocality of the cultural syncretism central to Delhi’s identity” (2011, 64).

Still, even though Singh does write about India with profound commitment she is primarily concerned with how to turn science into narrative poetics, as she has often explained: “I cannot separate the aesthetic impulse that drives me to create worlds from the pleasure I get doing physics” (in Kurtz 2016, 538). The article by Eric D. Smith, “Universal Love and Planetary Ontology in Vandana Singh’s *Of Love and Other Monsters*” raises this very issue, proposing that we transcend “the limits of certain postcolonial theorizations in the postmillennial present” (2016, 514). Reading Singh’s novella by using philosopher Alain Badiou’s critique of love, Smith stresses “the insufficiency of postcolonial theory for capturing the event of postcolonial sf and the latter’s potential for the production of planetary being” (514). He dismisses Bannerjee’s postcolonial claims as reductive, defending that Singh’s fiction “insists on themes of infinity, interdimensionality, and, indeed, universality, frequently underpinned by a referential framework of theoretical mathematics” (514).¹⁰

This is a position that I myself defend. However, I must also resist Smith’s reading because he is an American white man imposing on Singh’s stories the philosophical cast set by Badiou, a European white man. On his side, Graham Murphy also connects Singh’s fiction with a notion developed by a white man: biophilia, a concept by American biologist and naturalist Edward O. Wilson, consisting of “the recognition of emotional affiliation between human beings and other forms of life that form a larger pattern of complex patterns of behavior that govern all life on Earth” (Murphy 2017, 233).¹¹ At least, though, he can claim that Singh has often referred to this concept in interviews,

¹⁰ Smith has also read the stories in Singh’s first volume *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet* by exploring how her “unique SF intervention” takes the spaces of home, city, and nation juxtaposing them “with a differential chronotope, Peter Hitchcock’s ‘Long Space’, thereby reorienting postcolonial fiction toward a more urgent and comprehensive imaginative horizon: the creation of *a world* altogether different than the *one world* of globalization” (2012, 69, original italics).

¹¹ Murphy also highlights a key concept in quantum physics, entanglement, which even lends its title to one of Singh’s stories. Singh mentions specifically Karen Barad’s volume *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) as a major influence (in Kirtley online audio).

though at the same time this raises the issue of whether the main problem in judging Singh's work is that reviewers and scholars lack a sufficient understanding of the science she draws from. Nonetheless, the use of inclusive critical methods seems more beneficial for Singh. Reading Singh's "Oblivion: A Journey" together with white American author Kathleen Anne Goonan's "Memory Dog," Byrne and Levey conclude that both "resist Cartesian dualism and rigid stereotypes of identity, memory and embodiment, preferring instead to tease out the implications of fluid identity, manipulated bodies and potentially unstable psychological events which pass as memories" (2013, 70). Unreliable memory shapes "narrative processes and the construction of identity" (70), the reason why, I would add, identity can never be seen as an absolute value imposed from the outside but as a provisional, shifting construction built from the inside depending in embodied experience.

Singh has expressed her own views on all these questions quite frequently in interviews, but before I report her opinions I will briefly comment on her own interview with fellow speculative fiction author Ted Chiang. Born in the USA to Chinese parents, Chiang is celebrated as the new Jorge Luis Borges and never treated as an ethnic writer within sf fandom circles. However, this is not the case in academia. Thus, about one third of the fifteen entries on Chiang's work referenced by the MLA database (November 2019) allude to his ethnic background, although it must be noted that since the release of *Arrival* (2016), the film based on his "Story of Your Life" (1998), academic interest on Chiang is less focused on racial issues. Singh interviewed Chiang during the Asian American Writers' Workshop of 2012 and, after praising him for how his stories approach "fantastical made-worlds in a wholly scientific way" (as hers do), she brought up the issue of race. "Does your being Asian American inform your stories in any way?," Singh asked. Chiang replied that "Race inevitably plays a role in my life, but to date it's not a topic I've wanted to explore in fiction." He complained that "People have looked for a racial subtext in my work in a way I don't think they would have if my family name were Davis or Miller" (Singh 2012a, online). Although white American writers may be excepted from this rule if they are affiliated with communities perceived to be ethnically homogenous (the case of Jewish authors), Chiang is right to claim that the work of white authors is never analyzed from a racial or ethnic background. Their freedom not to engage in this aspect of identity and to select as the background for their own fiction any culture that

attracts them continues, as I have noted in the case of McDonald and India, though it may soon end.

Take, for instance, the case of white American author of speculative fiction Kij Johnson, who belongs in the same age group as Vandana Singh and has published also with Small Beer Publishers a very well received short story collection, *At the Mouth of the River of Bees* (2012). In some of the stories included in it—"Fox Magic," "The Empress Jingu Fishes," "The Cat Who Walked a Thousand Miles"—and in her novels *The Fox Woman* (2001) and *Fudoki* (2004) Johnson uses ancient Japan as her background, even though she has no connection whatsoever with this country. Joan Gordon, the editor as I have noted of the *Science Fiction Studies* special issue on Indian science fiction, defends her choice on the grounds that:

Johnson writes of Japan for readers of English, of Asian people as a white person, and of other animals for human beings. (...) Rigorously researched historical narratives enable her to avoid trivializing or exoticizing the complexity of another view of the world, and it may be that casting one's narrative into the remote past, as Johnson's stories do, avoids some of the difficulties of power inequity. (2017, 254)

Cultural appropriation, though, cannot be properly judged from a position similar to that of the author herself but only by those who can be potentially offended—for instance Minyoung Lee, an American female reader of Korean descent, who criticizes Johnson in her GoodReads review of *At the Mouth of the River of Bees*. Lee initially accepts Johnson's choice because "Japanese culture seems as exotic to me as it would to any Caucasian Kansas lady who decides to write about it" (Johnson is actually from Iowa) but "as an Asian" she ends up wondering much annoyed "what gives her the right to orientalize an entire people's point of view that lasted for several millennia before this lady even started researching about them?" (2012, online). Lee, it turns out, is deeply offended by "The Empress Jingu Fishes" because Johnson's inadequate research leads to serious mistakes in the representation of conflicts among the Korean, the Japanese, and the Chinese. Lee reports writing a furious letter to Johnson, which she immediately replied. Far from appeasing Lee, though, Johnson's self-justifying letter confirmed her impression that outsiders "not immersed in the subtle nuances" of the foreign culture they describe will inevitably offend insiders.

Lee asks herself why anyone would write about "another person's culture and history that you only superficially know about when you have a rich and fulfilling story

of your own that cannot be told in the fullest by someone else?" (2012, online). This raises a very interesting question: rather than speak of cultural appropriation perhaps we should speak of *cultural depletion* in the case of white authors who feel no strong attachment to their own cultural background and use therefore other cultures. The erasure of whiteness from the discourse on race and ethnicity—despite the rise of Critical Whiteness Studies and significant works such as Richard Dyer's *White* (1997)—is usually assumed to correspond to an interested avoidance of problematic identity issues from positions of normative superiority. However, as Haslam warns, if whiteness "remains hidden and unspoken, any problems in the maintenance of its boundaries will also remain hidden" (2015, 155). This includes the cultural weakening which inspires the vampiric uses of richer non-white cultures by white writers, and the consumption of non-white fictions by white readers.

As I have noted, Singh has expressed her views on how her identity is perceived in diverse interviews. She has also given a straightforward account of how she became a speculative fiction writer thanks to the mentorship of white American author Ursula K. le Guin. This is important because it shows that the evolution of non-white women writers is not always conditioned by their embracing a non-white tradition or genealogy, which they claim as their own. For black American speculative fiction writer N.K. Jemisin, winner of the Hugo and the Nebula awards, "Octavia Butler in her own way served as role model ... I know that every black female writer felt, 'Oh, here's someone like me, and it's OK for us to be here'" (in Womack 2013, 110). In Singh's case, however, the welcome into the genre (implicitly denied by chauvinistic white men) was extended by a white woman, le Guin. As an Indian and a woman, Singh felt alienated from the "white-maletechnofetishist(s)" she used to read as a teen: Asimov, Clarke, and the rest of the classic canon. Thanks to le Guin, the adult Singh discovered "an array of alternate worlds, futures, histories, in which people like me existed" (in Kurtz 2016, 537). In the heartfelt tribute written when le Guin died, Singh writes that despite the limited time spent together (followed by scant but regular correspondence) "she had a disproportionate effect, and it is safe to say that I would not be the writer or the person I am without the deep and abiding influence of who she was and what she wrote" (2018b, online). Singh learned from Ray Bradbury that science fiction could be as literary as any other genre but le Guin's *The Dispossessed* opened "a new universe": "It gradually became clear to me that what I was feeling was a homecoming—that science fiction was my country too" (2018b, online).

Despite her family's and her own political activism in her youth, Singh affirms that "I first became conscious of the need to decolonize that last frontier—the mind—while journeying through the worlds of Ursula le Guin's imagination" (2018b, online). The encouragement which Singh eventually received in person from le Guin led to her first publication and launched her career.

To be fair, Singh's project of decolonizing the mind coincides with emerging trends in the field of academic postcolonialism. Amar Acheraïou argues that since "postcolonial discourse reveals symptoms of a colonized imagination," given its dependence on notions of postmodernism, it is necessary to work towards "the field's theoretical emancipation" by "decolonizing its own conceptual arsenal and epistemologies" (2011, 185). When interviewer Malisa Kurtz asked Singh about her opinion of the label 'postcolonial science fiction', Singh explained that, for her, 'postcolonial' "has its uses" if it helps to dismantle what she calls 'paradigm blindness', that is to say, the "blinkers" imposed by the colonizers. Like many other writers, and scholars, however, she objects that "an implication of the term 'postcolonial' is that the unit of measure, the standard, is still the colonizer. That can be limiting. So while I acknowledge the importance of the term, I also want to transcend it, to go off and play in the much larger universe we inhabit" (2016, 543). Science fiction offers the "experience of playfully trying to decolonize my mind—shaking free of hitherto unexamined paradigms, trying to look at new vistas through new eyes" (544). In a more recent interview about *Ambiguity Machines*—focused by interviewer David Barr Kirtley (a white US sf short story writer) almost exclusively on science matters—Singh is the one to bring up the matter of her Indian heritage to offer the "tentative conclusion" that "perhaps identity is a shifting contextual thing; we can be free of it sometimes and some ways, or we can take on other identities in certain circumstances instead of a rigid box in which you place yourself" (2020, online audio).

Singh's Multilayered 'Narrative Choreography': "Ruminations in an Alien Tongue"

To back my argument that current strategies of interpretation must be made more flexible to accommodate singular cases, I'll turn next to "Ruminations in an Alien Tongue" (2012), which Singh herself has described as "One of the strangest stories I have ever written" (in Kirtley 2020, online audio). In the same interview, Singh explained that

she builds up her stories beginning with scattered paragraphs that she keeps in a folder, and that in this case she waited for her main character, Birha, to speak; meanwhile, Singh made sense of the background landscape imagined for her. A reviewer has noted that in *Ambiguity Machines* “Gender is fluid in some stories” not because the gender binary is broken but because “Frequent protagonists are strong resilient women unattached to men” (Tankard 2008, online). Birha is one of them, despite the fact that “Ruminations” narrates a romantic story about unrequited love.

In his own review of Singh's collection Gary K. Wolfe writes that “diversity in Singh's fiction is more complex than simply her identity as an Indian-born writer or her day job as a physics professor. For one thing, her characters are often middle-aged or older women, a fairly underrepresented group in SF” (2018, online). Wolfe adds that “Her themes are less likely to focus on romance and adventure than on compassion and loss,” yet actually in “Ruminations” Singh deals with both sets of themes: romance and adventure are inextricably linked to compassion and loss. Noting that Singh is “clearly interested in a degree of formal experimentation,” Wolfe concludes that:

Story, in fact, and how we are defined by it, is really Singh's *grand theme*, and while her sophisticated *narrative choreography* may give some readers pause—since her tales often begin with classic SF tropes and then move elsewhere—it's what makes her one of the most compelling and original voices in recent SF. (2018, online, my italics).

Assessing how this ‘narrative choreography’ works in “Ruminations,” then, should give us an accurate impression of who Singh is as a writer beyond her racial identity and even scientific background.

Singh's protagonist Birha is a migrant from an unnamed home planet, which is not necessarily Earth, though it is implied this is the case. The also unnamed planet where Birha lives has a human native population but they are the descendants of the early colonizers. The real native population were the mysterious insectoid aliens who vanished into a sealed stronghold under pressure from the human conquerors. The aliens, which Birha only knows from old photos, “had pale brown, segmented bodies, with a skeletal frame that allowed them to stand upright. They were larger than us but not by much, and they had feelers on their heads and light-sensitive regions beneath the feelers, and several limbs” (2018, 162). Other planets have been also occupied, though this occupation took place in the distant past and Birha herself refers to the interspecies war as an event “she

had forgotten when she was young” (155). There are diverse references to Birha's old age, and she assumes that her life might end in under a local year, that is, in less than seven ordinary (supposedly Earth) years. This, however, is no indication of her actual age, for Singh does not supply any information concerning the average longevity of humans in the future when the story is set. Birha could be 80 just as she could be 120.

The color of Birha's skin is brown, and so is that of Rudrak, the beautifully androgynous young man she loves. Skin color, though, is not an issue in this story in which Birha represents colonizing humanity rather than the colonized. This is not, however, a story about how the aliens lost their planet to Homo Sapiens but about the impact of their technological legacy on humans, mediated by Birha's efforts. When she was “just an acolyte at the university” (162), she recalls in one of the first-person ‘ruminations’ that alternate with the third person narration, Birha focused her research on the acoustic scripts abandoned by the missing aliens. These are representations of

the notes in a row of poeticas on the main streets of their cities. I was drunk with discovery, in love with the aliens, overcome with sorrow that they were, as we thought then, all dead. For the first time since I had come to this planet, I felt at home. (162)

The poeticas she alludes to are musical instruments and, so, “To understand the aliens I became a mathematician and a musician. After that, those three things are one thing in my mind: the aliens, the mathematics, the music” (162).

When Birha is “neither young nor old” (161) and already the main specialist in alien culture of the planet, a pilot testing an alien flyer is swallowed by the enigmatic alien ruins, so far inaccessible to any humans. Understanding that a particular sound combination acts as an ‘open sesame’ device, Birha unlocks a sealed door behind which she finds not only the astonished pilot but also a mysterious machine. Her study of the engine leads to a major change in all human life, for Birha discovers that what initially appeared to be a probability machine is in fact an actualizer. The aliens, it becomes apparent, never died but fled aided by the actualizer to a different universe, presumably free of human colonizers. With the know-how provided by Birha any person can program the machine to access yet another different universe. The portal appeals to “Streams of adventurers, dreamers, and would-be suicides, people dissatisfied with their lives, [who] went through the actualizer to find the universe that suited them better” (169). Aware that since programming the machine accurately is quite hard and that many persons will find

themselves in appalling alternatives, as happens to some who return, Birha remains skeptical and aloof. She chooses instead to stay on, and use the time left before her death to research the very idea of the multiverse.

The word 'multiverse' itself is not used in the story. Singh prefers using 'kalpa-vriksh', her version of Kalpavriksha, "a wish-fulfilling divine tree in Hindu mythology, Jainism and Buddhism ... mentioned in Sanskrit literature from the earliest sources" (*Wikipedia* 2020, online). Just by living, Birha ruminates, "we create ripples in the ever-giving cosmic tree, the kalpa-vriksh. Every branch is an entire universe. ... Perhaps we are ghosts of our other selves in other universes" (160). Rather than use the machine to take a peek into just a branch, Birha chooses to "see the kalpa-vriksh in its entirety" (168) while she resists the singular allure of the tempting alien machine. Birha's decision to remain in place has nothing to do with her being "too old to travel" (169) but with her disapproval "of this meddling with the natural unfolding of things. Besides there was the elegance of death" (170). The natives who sense death approaching allow themselves to be poisoned by a local vine that provides a "swift, painless death" (171); the plant dissolves then the body "until all the juices are absorbed. The rest is released to become part of the rich humus of the forest floor" (171). Undaunted, Birha finds it "comforting to think of dying in this way" (172).

The tale of how the alien machine inspires most human beings to try living in another universe while Birha chooses to stay behind is more than enough material for a short story which is not even 7000 words long. Singh, however, has far more to tell about Birha, which concerns not only how she prepares to face death but also how she loves—and this is where her 'narrative choreography' excels. As the old woman recalls, her mother called her Birha, meaning "'separated' or 'parted' in an ancient human language" (156) because she was dying as a consequence of childbirth. This language is Sanskrit, whereas in Punjabi Sufi Poetry Birha refers more specifically to "separation which implies longing for reunion."¹² This is the central theme of Singh's treatment of love in this story.

¹² This is a definition offered by a variety of sources, both online and print, but not traceable to an original source. Most likely, the work of Indian writer and folklorist Devendra Satyarthi (1908-2003), who studied the poetic genre of *birha*, the songs dealing with the separation of two lovers, is the main source.

Unlike the Sufi poets, Birha longs not for God but for Rudrak, the younger man she loves platonically but also quite contentedly. The 'gender fluidity' which Tankard's review highlights is, arguably, most perceptible in Singh's unconventional celebration of Birha's serene approach to unrequited love. Her biography includes a log-lasting formal partnership with Thirru, whom the third-person narrator describes as "difficult and strange ... a big, foolish child" (157). As love wanes, Birha's "irritation at his strangeness, his genius, his imbecility, provoked her into doing some of her best work. It was almost as though, in the discomfort of his presence, she could be more herself" (157). When her desire for another man surfaces, Birha starts practicing "the art of resisting temptation" (157) until she feels "freedom from desiring" (157). This does not mean that Birha renounces sex but that, after the separation from Thirru, none of her lovers inspires any deep feelings. When Rudrak appears in her life, Birha feels "unprepared for him" (158).

Singh weaves with Rudrak a deeply romantic layer into her subtle tale, which tells much about her passion for complex storytelling. Rudrak could have easily been a local lover who would eventually abandon Birha for a more promising universe elsewhere, using the alien machine. He is, however, the protagonist of a rather cruel love story embedded in Birha's own biography. An old, dying woman called Ubbiri suddenly appears one day from within the alien machine to tell a remarkable story as she lies dying. As a child Ubbiri learned to love the white dwarf stars inspired by a nursery rhyme—the equivalent in her universe of "Twinkle, Twinkle"—and eventually became an astronomer researching that kind of star for her doctoral dissertation. Rudrak, an engineer, had built a 'bristleship' capable of crossing white stars to gather their data, and he and Ubbiri soon start not only a scientific collaboration but also a romantic relationship. This takes a tragic turn when a malfunction of the bristleship during a solo trip leaves Rudrak stranded in a time-loop. Ubbiri knows that the stars are the passages linking the branches of the cosmic tree, and she manages to reach Birha's planet having grasped that sooner or later Rudrak will appear there. Ubbiri, however, dies of old age about one and a half years before a disoriented Rudrak first appears in Birha's doorstep.

Still, Singh adds another layer to her narrative choreography. Aware, like no one else, of how the alien machine works, Birha tries to send Rudrak back to the universe where he came from, and so give him a chance to be reunited with Ubbiri. She fails nine times. Rudrak returns at irregular intervals, with no memories of Ubbiri's death or of having met Birha to suffer again his tragic loss. Birha's inability to calculate the right

path for him causes growing "irritation" which, she realizes, "signifies love" (171). Birha's love for Rudrak is not, however, a simple passion:

She felt no need for him to reciprocate. Sometimes she would look at her arms, their brown, lean strength, the hands showing the signs of age, and remember what it was like to be touched, lovingly, and wonder what it would be like to caress Rudrak's arm, to touch his face, his lips. But it was an abstract sort of wondering. Even if she could make him forget Ubbiri (and there was no reason for her to do that), she did not really want him too close to her. (159)

This is because Birha enjoys "tranquility" (159) and serenity which, at her age, are for her more valuable than love.

The final layer in this story is Birha's realization that her approach to the cosmic tree is radically wrong. She had assumed that despite the many "changes between universes" (172) Rudrak, Ubbiri, and herself would remain the same persons, only to finally realize that "*Identity is neither invariant nor closed*" (172, original italics). Birha feels immense relief at this realization since she could not explain satisfactorily to herself why Rudrak seemed to be a slightly different man each time he returned. The fluidity of identity comforts her: "The truth, as always, is more subtle and more beautiful. Birha takes a deep breath of gratitude, feels her death only a few ten-days away" (172). Birha adjusts then her calculations to fit this 'truth' and when another Rudrak appears, looking once more for Ubbiri, "His look of anxiety fades for a moment, to be replaced by wonder. 'This looks familiar,' he says. 'Have I been here before?'" (172). There is a solid chance, then, that Birha will eventually send her beloved Rudrak to the universe where Ubbiri waits for him, before she herself crosses over to whatever may lie beyond life. This is how science fiction works: it invites us to imagine what it is like to be an individual awed by the immensity of the universe or, as scientists prefer today, of the multiverse.

Conclusions

The aim of this article has been to start a conversation about whether academic postcolonialism and the identity politics focused on race and ethnicity are actually helping non-white women writers. Taking as an example the outstanding short stories by Indian-born author Vandana Singh I have argued that this is not always the case, particularly when the woman author in question has other interests, in her case a professional dedication to science. Singh, as I have argued, is placed at a crossroads in current speculative fiction for, whereas as an Anglophone writer she enjoys certain advantages

over white women in the same genre who write in other languages, as an Indian migrant she is expected to meet the Orientalist expectations of her white Western readers. Attributing to her any geographical representativeness is, besides, misguided for, even though she makes frequent use of her native Indian heritage, Singh does not regard her fiction as representative in any way and has herself declared that her strongest literary influence is white American writer Ursula K. le Guin. It is, besides, unfair to force identity politics and postcolonial issues onto non-white women authors who are trying to be free of them, particularly considering that, as the case of Kij Johnson shows, white women are hardly ever required to explain who they are in racial or ethnic terms. Singh has insisted that science is far more relevant to understand and interpret her story, but I have completed the article by following Gary K. Wolfe's allusion to her complex 'narrative choreography'. As the analysis of "Ruminations on an Alien Tongue" has hopefully shown, what characterizes Singh's writing is a remarkable ability to build her tales using as many plot layers as possible, combining thus the sense of awe and wonder of science fiction with deep insights into, in this case, the inner life of a contented old woman in love—a subject much neglected in women's writing of any type.

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